

## Biofuels and sustainable development: can sustainability standards stop 'land grabbing'?

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### About the research

Biofuels have often been presumed to offer a 'win-win' solution to the North's over-consumption of fossil fuels, while contributing to rural development in the global South. However, in too many cases, biofuels investments have been linked to 'land grabbing': they have involved the acquisition of vast tracts of land in rural areas of poor countries without respecting the already-insecure land rights of subsistence farmers.

Agricultural producers are encouraged to adopt sustainability standards which are then monitored by 3rd party auditors. These standards have been incorporated into EU biofuel governance (the EU Renewable Energy Directive (RED) 2008), giving them a mandatory status in one of the biggest export markets for biofuels.

However, through a study of the sustainability standards established by two 'multi-stakeholder roundtables', Bonsucro and the Roundtable on Sustainable Biomaterials (RSB), this research finds flaws in the standards, loopholes in their compliance levels and shortcomings in their ability to discipline the companies upon which they are financially dependent. Yet, while Bonsucro and the RSB can be criticised for flaws in their standards in relation to such issues, many other EU-approved schemes do not protect against land grabbing at all.

**This research focuses on the extent to which global sustainability standards and certification schemes can prevent 'land grabs'.**

### Policy implications

- EU RED criteria require that companies produce 'sustainable biofuels' to attain market access, but it fails to include basic criteria related to land rights. This should be corrected.
- Where land has been acquired from subsistence farmers or pastoralists for a biofuel plantation, audit evidence collected of 'free, prior and informed consent' is inadequate to prove 'land grabbing' has not taken place. Additional evidence should be sought.
- The 'multi-stakeholder' ethos of inclusive participation, adopted by so many WWF-supported sustainability roundtables, needs to be extended into the process of certification.
- Prior to each audit, standards bodies should undertake on-the-ground awareness-raising and training for community associations and local NGOs.
- Greater engagement between the auditing team and locally-informed civil society actors should be incorporated into auditing practices for sustainability certification.
- Sustainability certification audits should be publicly available so that land acquisition practices become more open and transparent.

## Key findings

- Certification against sustainability standards approved by the EU Renewable Energy Directive (RED) 2008 is no guarantee that 'land grabbing' has not taken place.
- To achieve 'certified biofuel' status, operators may not have to comply with all sustainability standards, and audits may only consider 5-25% of a company's operations.
- Audits themselves demand forms of evidence that are often inappropriate and unable to measure land tenure insecurity, or abuse by a company.
- Weak EU-RED criteria have created competition between schemes to 'ratchet down' the standards, providing them with no incentive to include sustainability concerns as they try to make themselves attractive to the very companies that may need to be disciplined.

## Further information

You can read the full article upon which this policy brief is based: Fortin & Richardson (2013): Certification Schemes and the Governance of Land: Enforcing Standards or Enabling Scrutiny?, *Globalizations*, (10)1, pp. 141-159. It can be found at [bristol.ac.uk/policybristol/research/fortin-globalizations.pdf](http://bristol.ac.uk/policybristol/research/fortin-globalizations.pdf). This is a preprint of an article whose final and definitive form has been published in the *Globalizations* © 2013 Copyright Taylor & Francis; *Globalizations* is available online at [tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14747731.2013.760910](http://tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14747731.2013.760910).

For further reading, and an empirical field study of certification in practice, please see:

Maconachie, R. & Fortin, E. (2013) 'New agriculture' for sustainable development? Biofuels and agrarian change in post-war Sierra Leone', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 51(2), 249-277.

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The research was supported by the British Academy (Fortin) and the Leverhulme Trust (Richardson).



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